



From St. Paul to Sao Paolo
by Senator Norm Coleman

Minnesota has a distinguished history of international engagement, due in part to the dedicated work of our concerned citizens and strong leaders. Part of this legacy has been left to us by one of our former senators, Hubert H. Humphrey, in his work on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his contributions to the noble beginnings of the Peace Corps. So it was appropriate that the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota hosted a field hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and Narcotics Affairs which I chaired last month. The hearing focused on the ties between Minnesota and Latin America, offering a view of economic development, democratic security, and people-to-people exchanges with our neighbors to the South.

In reality, that hearing was the debarkation point for a three-country tour to three critically important countries that play an increasingly important role not only in our hemisphere, but worldwide—Brazil, Columbia, and Venezuela.

I felt an immediate connection, landing in the city of Sao Paolo, the St. Paul of Brazil. The mayor of Sao Paolo, Jose Serra, and I had much more in common than having both been mayors of cities named St. Paul. While Sao Paolo far outnumbers St. Paul, we discussed many issues of mutual concern: roads and traffic, budgets and pensions, health care and AIDS. I hope to continue my relationship with Mayor Serra, and to share with him some of the urban planning ideas that benefited St. Paul, Minnesota.

I quickly discovered that Minnesotans and Brazilians share a passion for developing sources of renewable energy. When oil prices soared at the onset of the 80's, Brazil began to expand its ethanol-only car research. Today, nearly 20 percent of Brazil's cars run on ethanol-only fuel; 30 percent of new cars in Brazil operate on Flex Fuel, which uses a device that permits the driver to select between gas, ethanol, and soy biodiesel; and an additional 50 percent of new cars run on "mix-fuel," an engine that runs on a combination of ethanol-and-oil. If Brazil can make this kind of commitment to alternative fuels, it is clear to me that the United States should be able to do likewise. In fact, this may be one area where we look to Brazil as a model. As oil prices continue to go through the roof, America should reduce our dependence on foreign oil—like Brazil which had decreased its reliance from 85 percent in 1978 to 10 percent in 2002. In any language, that reduction in oil dependence translates to success.

Brazil's huge market also holds the potential to help fuel Minnesota's economy. However, Brazil poses some critical challenges, including the protection of intellectual property rights (IPR). While I was in Sao Paolo I spoke at a conference on IPR and encouraged the Brazilians to put into action a new plan

for improving IP protections. Some progress has been made on Brazil's piracy of Round-Up Ready soybeans. I was pleased to meet with a number of Minnesota businesses operating in Brazil who conveyed concerns not only about IPR, but also about Brazil's current tax system, lack of sufficient infrastructure, and complex government bureaucracy.

My next stop, Venezuela, further underscored the importance of energy in another way. Venezuela is important to America's economy—it is our fourth largest foreign supplier of oil. Yet political instability and tense relationship with the United States could jeopardize that long-standing relationship. During my two-hour meeting with President Chavez, he told me he would like to "turn a new page" with regard to the difficult state of U.S. Venezuelan relations. I acknowledge his pledge, but I also believe that the United States will need to work diplomatically with countries like Spain and Brazil in order to hold President Chavez to his promises about strengthening democracy within Venezuela and stability beyond Venezuela's borders. Minnesota companies exporting to Venezuela told me they are profitable, but political uncertainty and the increasing role of the Venezuelan government—particularly the military—in business decisions create a challenging climate for business there.

One of the highlights of my trip came when I met Navy officer Jason Testa, a Minnesota native from St. Cloud who serves as an exchange officer with the Colombian Navy. It struck me that we have a lot of Minnesotans like Jason Testa around the world, demonstrating the true American spirit through exchange programs, government service, and the Peace Corps. During my visit to Colombia, it really hit home what strong leadership means to this region. As I met with President Alvaro Uribe, Ronald Reagan's words came to mind: "A leader, once convinced that a particular course of action is the right one, must be undaunted when the going gets tough." Every day, President Uribe risks his life to do his job, but under his unwavering leadership and Plan Colombia, important progress is being made in this country once rife with crime and chaos. Violent crime is at its lowest level in 16 years. In the last two years, homicides have fallen by 17 percent, massacres by 56 percent, kidnappings by 35 percent, and acts of terrorism by 18 percent. Drug eradication, interdiction, and extraditions are at record levels. There is also an economic benefit to this improved security—U.S. firms that had previously pulled out of Colombia due to security concerns told me they are reconsidering their investments. In spite of these positive developments, however, three American hostages remain in the hands of the FARC. The Colombian government and the U.S. Embassy are working tirelessly towards their safe release.

America's support for Colombia is predicated on respect for human rights. During this trip to Colombia and during the trip I made two years ago, I raised human rights concerns in each and every meeting. As I promised during the field hearing in Minnesota, I emphasized the need for a full investigation of last year's brutal massacre at the village of San Jose de Apartado. President Uribe was firm in his assurance that he will do everything in his power to find and bring to justice whoever is responsible, be they the FARC, another armed group, or even Colombian forces. Effective leadership requires trust, and human rights are essential to establishing that trust.

I've returned home hopeful of the great achievements that lay ahead in terms of trade, economic and democratic developments as we work with our neighbors in South America. This trip has given me a better understanding of Minnesota's place in the Western Hemisphere and a renewed commitment to Minnesotans' leadership around the world.